

Setting Limits

“I’m doin this!”

Helping the child who is easily distracted by Polly Greenberg

Dear Polly, Bobby, age 4, is a child in my class who can’t seem to focus on tasks and activities. His friend Sam entertains him with raucous singing and crazy faces. Bobby thinks Sam is terrific, so of course he watches, copies, and cavorts rather than doing what he needs to do. Because he can’t seem to stay focused, Bobby isn’t learning many of the concepts I hope children will gain this year. How can I help him?

Let me start by saying that it’s wonderful that Bobby and Sam are enjoying fun and friendship. But I’m sure the fact that Bobby is so easily distracted is irritating. During the flurry of tasks to be tackled, and needs to be met within the constraints of tight schedules at school and at home, teachers and parents need cooperation from children.

Build in Socialization

One of the most important life skills is the ability to connect well with peers, so big chunks of playtime, when children get to make many decisions, work things out, and develop their ideas, are invaluable. Relationships are also a language-learning essential. What better way to develop it than through back and forth conversation with friends? Make the activities you introduce playful, with lots of opportunity for socialization. For instance, invite pairs of children to search for and collect a certain category of things, play with a set of math manipulatives, or work on a huge mural together. Given the situation with Bobby and Sam, when it’s time to tidy up after play, separate them so that Bobby isn’t tempted to be distracted. (You might suggest that Sam help someone else in another learning center.)

Let Him Move!

There are many published curriculum materials that can help you plan “hands-on” lessons. Standards

created for early childhood programs recommend that intriguing projects and activities that include movement while learning should be an integral part of developmentally appropriate programming for preschoolers. In Bobby’s case, it seems that including the opportunity for movement in the activities you introduce may increase his interest and ability to focus. During this time, stay nearby, assisting Bobby if needed and supporting his focus on the activities.

Introduce Meaningful Activities

You can try to feature activities and projects that children of this age find meaningful. An abundance of resource books can give you ideas, but by far the best projects are those that arise from what the children are interested in—the ants outside, the construction site nearby. Bobby is less likely to get distracted from something he’s involved in or finds physically challenging. He may not yet be ready for academic learning, or may have some other kind of problem. Taking this approach will enable Bobby to learn while doing what he likes to do—and does well. ECT

Polly Greenberg has been a child/parent/ staff development specialist for almost 50 years. She has worked for the U.S. Department of Education, the Department of Health and Human Services, the War on Poverty, and the NAEYC.